Group of Mermaids in Charles Dillingham's New Aquatic Spectacle at the Hippodrome

WINCHELL SMITH TALKS SHOP

FEW American playwrights know the stage better than Winchell Smith. If one is not convinced of that fact by seeing his play it is only necessary to read these words, which are a part of his speech at the recent Playwrights Club. He said that he was not a literary playwright.

"My work has chiefly been to stage and invent business to go with scenes and I am sorry to be compelled to confess that all my work on plays has been of a basely commercial character. I never thought about writing a play. I loved the stage from the time I could first be taken to the theatre; I never got over that. After twelve years as an actor I realized that I wasn't much good as such; in the meantime I got married and I found the money I could earn acting was barely enough to keep my wife and myself. The little I could save in the season was spent in the summer vacation. If health gave way—Heaven knows what would have happened, and although I didn't want to quit the work I realized that if I ever was going to make a dollar it must be through some other theatrical work.

"Arnold Daly and I went into partnership for the production of 'Candida.' Arnold had $100 and I had $145. The Shuberts allowed us the use of a theatre, but not for rehearsals. That we did in the leading woman's flat or in the basement of some hotel where Arnold knew the proprietor; rehearsed while the fireman shook down the furnace; the noise helped us as we were used to it. Eventually the piece was done at the Princess Theatre—now gone.

"The critics spoke so well of it that we tried to get it on in a regular theatre. It had a week at the Madison Square Theatre, but no business. It looked as if the whole game was over when I found what is now the Berkeley Lyceum, where Charles Frohman had been presenting a French company in one act plays. I went to his manager, Alf. Hayman, and tried to get the theatre on sharing terms for 'Candida.' He agreed to rent it to me for $175 a week, with light and a man who stood in front in uniform during the evenings and swept out the theatre during the daytime. I didn't have the $175—and they wanted two weeks in advance. I managed to borrow $1,500 from William Gillette, always one of my best friends. He told me he was glad to lend it to me, as it would cure me of trying to be a manager, and that it would probably take me five years to pay it back. With that encouragement from Mr. Gillette, and the money, we hired the theatre for two weeks. The first week we came out even, the second we made a little money, and afterward we played to capacity.

"That was followed by 'You Never Can Tell.' I had saved enough by that time to make a good production. Then we put on 'John Bull's Other Island,' which was a terrible failure. I was broke again and tried to recover with 'Mrs. Warren's Profession.' Daly and the cast and the management—all of us were arrested.

"I gave up the idea of being a manager. I was in debt, and began to think of something that interested me more than anything else—the producing of plays. I tried to get a job as stage director: I did find one or two. One day I was sent for by Frederic Thompson, who had the Hippodrome and Luna Park at that time. He was dramatizing 'Brewster's Millions' and engaged me to produce it. I came around for the manuscript, as arranged with Thompson, and he told me that his dramatist had gone back on him. 'You do it!' said Thompson.

"It was the first time I had ever dreamed of doing such a thing. The idea of writing a play struck me as humorous, but I didn't tell Thompson. I got a chap to help me, Byron Ongley, and we went at it together, and I spent three of the most unhappy months of my life on that book. We gave it up three or four times, but didn't dare go back to Thompson and tell him. Finally in some way we got it into four blue covers and tossed up to see who would go to see Thompson with it. I lost. I told Thompson I had finished it and he told me he would like to hear it at 11 o'clock that night. I read it to myself first that afternoon and felt worse than ever. I came back at 11 and began tremulously with the first act and it sounded perfectly awful. Half way through the act I glanced up to see if he was ready to kick me out and found him peacefully sleeping. After about an hour I saw he was getting restless and I said, 'Well, what do you think of it?' He said, 'I think it is all right.' He told me to go ahead and get a cast and begin rehearsals. We did a great deal of fixing up between the time I read it and the beginning of rehearsals. Then I began work which was fun to me and always has been, but the play didn't rehearse well; I didn't think it would. After a while we all got disgusted, Ed Abeles, Thompson, Ongley and myself. We would suddenly pause in the midst of the first act and Thompson would say, 'You can't possibly play that scene.' We would keep the company waiting—perhaps that would be a Tuesday, and I would announce, 'The next rehearsal will be a week from next Friday.' The company all stayed with us because they couldn't get anything else to do.

"At last the piece was put on. We had a different manuscript by the time it was finished—not only a different manuscript but the second version had been changed and the third and the fourth. We had to have a stenographer come and take it down after we played it because there was nothing on paper that was the whole play. We had no manuscript at all. I didn't dare attend the opening night at Trenton. We had a rehearsal there Sunday night beginning at 6 and ending at 10 o'clock Monday morning, most of it taken up in working—the scene of the rocking ship—Thompson's invention. After 8 o'clock I went back to New York, thinking that was over and I should never write a play again. I had a job as house manager at the Herald Square Theatre. I had to go through a lonely afternoon. I came home and found that my wife had disappeared—had gone to Trenton. About 1 A. M. I had had no word and I didn't feel disappointed, as I had given the play up for lost. Next morning at the Herald Square Theatre a bus drove up with my wife, Marc Klaw, Sam Harris and others—a lot of Syndicate people I had never met before. They came into the lobby and told me that the piece stood a great chance of success. I hardly believed it even when I saw the next performance. Thompson wanted to bring it immediately into New York, but I prevailed on him not to do so, as I saw some faults in it.

"We booked three nights and a matinee in Syracuse, opening with a matinee. Thompson and I went to see it and got there just before 2 o'clock. There were just about as many in the audience as there were ushers—a $12 or $14 house. The play began and when they came to a certain scene in the first act Thompson said, 'That is dreadful.' I said, 'Yes.' Then I said, 'Wait a moment.' I told the audience that the actors were not playing the scene well and then I went back and had the company go over the scene again. We kept the matinee going until about 7 o'clock in the evening—the audience all had a splendid time.

"The last act was written and rewritten three times before the play came into New York. Eventually it came to the New Amsterdam Theatre, the worst theatre in the world for it. It succeeded and I found myself drawing royalty of 1¼ per cent. on the gross receipts as my share, and I have never thought that it was too little. That piece went on and made a lot of money. It had a ship in it that had a great deal to do with its success. The play was very bad indeed, but not quite bad enough to sink the ship. That play made over a million dollars.

"For the first time in my life I realized that there was a great deal more to do to a play after it was written than during its composition, and I believe that many plays that might have been great financial successes have failed because they were not worked over enough.

"'The Master,' in which Arnold Daly recently played, with one hour's work might have been made a big success, it seems to me. The central character was a great physician without a diploma, and he was effecting wonderful cures in a hospital—off stage. I don't know that any one in the audience ever dreamed of this man being a doctor. He came in in a breakfast coat and drank a cup of coffee. If they had only made that hospital live, only brought a mother in, perhaps, to snatch him by the knees and say, 'Save my boy's life,' and try to make the audience believe that he was a great man doing a great work, we would have forgiven him, and it would have turned the play into a big success. It is all very well to write plays that are too good to draw, but I believe that an author should not write well enough to prevent the audience from coming. I believe that a play is written to be played on the stage."

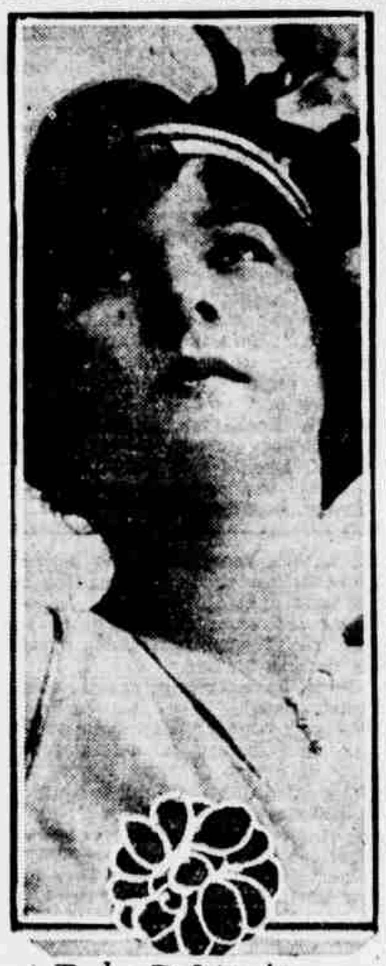
"There has been a great deal of criticism against our frivolous, helter-skelter American plays, which they say are ridiculous and sentimental and old fashioned, and the critics are continually saying that when an author makes money with a play he becomes so imbued with the idea of making more money that he only tries to bring out the things that will make money, irrespective of their quality. I do not think that is true. I am sure that there are many authors like myself who give the best that is in them while remembering that after all unless the manager makes money the play cannot last and therefore the play can do no good to any one.

"I steadfastly refuse to reject so-called old fashioned subjects. The critics may laugh at the mortgage on the old farm, but do you realize that there are mortgages on four-fifths of the farms in this country, and that's no laughing matter.

"When I wrote 'Turn to the Right!' I realized in advance just how much of this old fashioned stuff there was in it. My business partner, John L. Golden, and I discussed this matter fully before we opened at the Gaiety Theatre and agreed that it was this very same 'old stuff' that gave to the play the sincerity we aimed at and that, as events proved, has done so much for the great success of 'Turn to the Right!' And this in spite of the fact that we anticipated many caustic references to the 'old stuff' from the critics. I need hardly say that when we read the criticisms the day after the opening we were delighted with the broad spirit of understanding with which the reviewers treated our production.

"I remember going to the first act of one of Winthrop Ames's plays with Gillette and we sat away back, and he said: 'This is the most delightful evening I ever had at a play of this kind; I cannot hear a word of it.' It is fine to have good literary work on the stage and once in a while I have enjoyed very much a play of that quality, but the first consideration is to get your people in.

"I had occasion to rewrite 'The Henrietta' with Victor Mapes, and realized then how times have changed in three minutes. In the original 'Henrietta,' in its day a great success, would be impossible now. It had to be modernized. In the days of its vogue authors insisted that certain scenes should not run for more than three minutes. In the original 'Henrietta' a six minute love scene was deliberately interrupted by two comedy characters in order to split it into two three minute intervals. That's all changed now.



Babe Dakin in "The Show of Wonders"

"If an audience ever stops to think of the plausibility of some of the things I have written they would walk out on me. The only way is to go so fast that they don't think of it and do not care. Take the case of 'The Boomerang.' The first act was written just about as it was played, with but few changes. In the second act I got stuck, worked at it off and on—hating to work on it—for four months, and then was on the point of writing to Belasco that I had to give it up when I happened to talk it over with Victor Mapes and told him the story. He pointed out the defects in it and I gave it up. Mapes kept thinking about it. He liked the story. I asked him if he would go in on it with me. He said he would. We tore up all my stuff and began again. We wrote the first act in three days; worked on the second act for seven months and wrote eight copies before we got the one we used at last. We wrote the last act in four hours without any trouble at all.

"Now I want to say something to you about royalties. I have had a great many people tell me that it was a shame the way young, untried authors were very often taken advantage of by unscrupulous managers. I have heard some persons say that Mr. Belasco had cheated authors. I have heard Mr. Augustus Thomas say that it is our business, every one of us who knows what royalties are, to tell the young people what they should get; to tell them that the ordinary royalty is a sliding scale of from 5 to 10 per cent of the gross receipts. (Authors with a lot of reputation get more; very often people get less.) I absolutely disagree with that. I do not believe there should be any set ideas on royalties, and that a play that costs a manager $3,000 a week to present should not pay the same royalty as a play that costs him $5,000, $6,000 or $7,000 to present, in case both these pieces play to the same business. And I believe that if an unknown author has a play accepted and produced by Belasco he is better off and will make more money with that play than if he should give it to certain other producers for 20 per cent royalty, because Mr. Belasco works enthusiastically on a manuscript. If you, as an author, had a play accepted by Mr. Belasco, you would be much more fortunate than to have it accepted by any other manager in this country. He has made plays successful that I feel sure would never even have got to Broadway if they had been in the hands of any one else.

"A farce entitled 'Officer 666' was written by a young man who was in vaudeville getting $35 a week—Augustin McHugh. He wrote this play and he produced it somewhere in stock, and he said it had 'moments.' I had just had a failure called 'The Only Son,' featuring Wallace Eddinger. Wallace Eddinger was out and Cohan & Harris had a contract with him and had to pay him a season's salary, so it was very necessary to try to scare up something for Eddinger. George Nash came around to Cohan & Harris with the manuscript. Mr. Harris read it and thought there might be something made of it to put Eddinger in. He sent for me and asked if I could fix it up. I didn't think I could, but felt responsible for Eddinger, knowing that they had just dropped about $50,000 backing my judgment on a play, and I wanted to try anything. I had a talk with McHugh, who said he wouldn't object. Then I had three weeks work, day and night, on the manuscript. We rehearsed it and were to open in the same place as we opened 'The Boomerang'—Trenton, N. J., on New Year's afternoon, and New Year's came on Monday. We had a dress rehearsal at the Cohan Theatre on Sunday. 'Officer 666' was a farce, as Lou Weber used to say, 'pure and simple.' George Cohan, who didn't even know what the play was about, came to the rehearsal. For that kind of a play Cohan is the best judge in America. Three or four of George's pals came with him to see it!

"They waited patiently through half of the first act, then some actor said something particularly terrible. George Cohan began to laugh at it in the wrong place; he almost had hysterics and it was all we could do to get him out of the theatre. Then I thought the thing was perfectly horrible. We called another rehearsal for 9 o'clock, to see if we could do a few things to it, and told the company they could get away at 11:30 to say a Happy New Year. Sam Harris, Cohan and I went out to talk it over. George was a little ashamed of what he had done, so he put his arm about me and said: 'I don't know much about many kinds of plays, but I live on this kind of a street and I want to tell you you can't write a play about nothing. That play is absolutely about nothing, and fifty Shakespeares and a whole lot of Pineros never could do anything with it. Too bad you wasted your time.' Then he said to Sam Harris: 'Just telephone down to Trenton and cancel the engagement and give the company two weeks salary and tell them there will be no show.' Harris telephoned the manager at Trenton and told him we were going to cancel. He answered that they were sold out, it being a holiday, and that if we cancelled the play he would expect us to settle for our share of the loss to the house. Sam decided it might be better to go down and play the thing, bad as it was; so, because the theatre manager wouldn't let us off, down we went to Trenton.

"The piece up to the end of the second act went wonderfully at the matinee. After the second act there was nothing to start with; it was over at the end of the second act, the whole situation had been cleared up. When the curtain went down the thief had disappeared; then the curtain went up and the stage was in the same position. In the last act there was nothing to do at all but let the thief get out of the box and out of the house. Well, we kept it on the road for four weeks. We wrote twenty-five minutes of nothing that went better than anything else in the play out of a line that a manager had made me cut out of another piece I had written. It saved the whole thing. Where the girl said: 'Isn't this wonderful? It doesn't seem as if it could have happened except in a play.' And he said: 'Believe me, it couldn't.'

"There was a case where a man whose judgment is as keen as that of any one in this country went wrong. That experience made me realize that how a play is received, what a play does, whether it draws or not, is a matter of guesswork and really very big guesswork. A play that acts well very seldom—to my way of thinking—reads well. I don't believe it counts a great deal if managers return manuscripts to people. I think they are much more apt to keep bad plays than good plays if these bad plays have good long, well written, sensible speeches that never seem to act. They read better.

"William Gillette's manuscripts are the most terrible things to read through, unless you have seen the plays. I read 'Secret Service' before it was produced and couldn't see any chance for it. Even when it was produced it seemed as if it was empty. Long pauses didn't seem to amount to anything. There were places where all the cast felt uncomfortable. I never knew what that piece was until it had an audience and I found out that very often a well written play cannot live until we get the audience to do a good deal of the acting. The audience acted just as hard as the cast did in 'Secret Service.' Gillette had figured that out: he had visualized what these scenes were going to do with an audience and how an audience was going to fill up these pauses, which we couldn't see at all.

"The modern type of comedy, which is the only thing I know anything about at all, should be written with a great many other things in mind besides the dialogue. The dialogue must be as carefully done as we can do it, but just as important as that are the pantomime scenes, where there are pauses without anything being spoken. I believe that one of the most essential qualities for a playwright is the knowledge of stage direction. I am sure there isn't a man in the world who can produce a manuscript of mine as well as I can. I tried it with Belasco. He couldn't touch them—and he has forgotten more about stagecraft than I will ever know. It's the man who creates the story who knows—should know—what the lines really mean. So that a knowledge of stage direction is a tremendous help in writing a play. I cannot write a scene to save my life without having my scene, in front of me, and my characters little flags, to see where they go. If I tried to write a lot of dialogue about something I wanted to say in a piece I couldn't do it!

"I see lots of plays that are failures because they begin with a lot of explanations about what the author wishes the audience to know about characters. Sometimes an author will have an actor talk about two or three other characters the audience hasn't seen. The first thing to find out is that we can depend on an audience's curiosity. Don't keep it inquisitive too long. Let it see what has been talked about.

"'The Fortune Hunter,' the first original play I ever wrote, had a long story to tell in the first act that had to do with all the comedy in the rest of the play. The first act after the first two or three minutes was sixteen minutes solid conversation between two fellows sitting at a table. They talked over sixteen minutes, then the curtain went down. When we came to the second act the audience remembered it word for word; they never failed from the opening night. George Cohan, Charles Dillingham and Charles Frohman said, 'There isn't a chance the audience is ever going to remember this,' but before we began the dialogue we happened to have aroused their curiosity, so they listened to every word and were glad to get it.

"One other thing in writing comedy is—don't try to be funny. Don't ever try to write anything that is funnier than the scene. It is like when an actor comes on with a funny makeup and then is not as funny as the makeup. I saw a play in Chicago recently. A clever comedienne came on with a very eccentric makeup and no fun in her lines at all. It was pitiful. In comedy never let them see you are trying to be funny. If you have to have a really funny situation, don't have any dialogue in it at all—it will kill it. Never have a player try to get a laugh; let the audience discover the fun. The kind of laughs that come with effort are never the kind of laughs that bring people to the theatre. I am sure that that is a good tip in comedy writing—not to try to be funny. One of the worst things is to have a line at the beginning of the play that every one knows should be a laugh, and not get it; the moment an audience doesn't laugh at it cut it out."

THE BROOKLYN PLAYS.

The Montauk Theatre will this week bring to Brooklyn Clare Kummer's little farce "Good Gracious Annabelle." The company from the Republic Theatre will appear.

The popular pantomime "Pierrot the Prodigal," which was so successful at the Little Theatre this winter, will be on view at the Majestic Theatre.

BROOKLYN VARIETY.

ORPHEUM—"Vaudeville Jubilee," including Wilbur Mack and Nella Walker in "A Pair of Tickets," Maude Lambert and Ernest Ball, Ed Lavine, juggler; Marie Stoddard, Will Oakland, Joe Towle, Hans Wilson and the McNallys, Emmet Welch's minstrels, Rathe brothers in "A Study in Endurance," the Musical Johnstons, the Dancing La Vars, "Patria."

STAR—Simonds & Lake's "Auto Girls," with Carol Schroder, Harry Seymour, James J. Lake and Capt. Barnett and son, midgets. Wrestling on Friday evening.